Starboard

By Alexander Neff

With a final *clang* of a stray asteroid off the bow, the storm finishes. A few of the lights flicker back on, but a few remain off. This is my first clue that something has gone horribly wrong.

"Hale?" I call, unstrapping myself from the seat belt and climbing out into the main cabin. The ship's quiet except for the quiet static of comms that I had left on before the first asteroids had begun to pelt my craft. "Hale?" The lack of response is clue number two. My mission partner would never decline to respond if he was able; despite his tendency to joke, he knew a serious situation when he saw one. A hot prickle of worry began to set in at the base of my throat as I hurried to the back of the cabin and peered out the 6-inch-thick silica glass, desperate to catch a glimpse of Hale's craft. Nothing. Just thick streaks of frozen space debris tumbling through the dark, catching the light of my flashing red emergency lamps from the back of the hull and blocking any decent view I might've had of Hale.

I sprint back, my heart racing, to comms, and scream into the transmitter: "Hale! Do you copy? Hale!" A string of obscenities flows from my mouth after the same slow static hiss is my only response, almost as if the ghost of the storm is breathing into the cabin. The thought gives me a shiver, but I can't bear to switch off the transmitter, so I let it fall to hang by its cord next to the control panel. Hale's consistent communication has been the only thing keeping me sane throughout the journey, and the thought that I may have to travel the rest by myself hits harder than the storm ever did.

I swallow my anxiety and force myself into motion. That's been rule number one up here: productivity. "You should never be bored in space," Hale's voice used to crackle through the transmitter. "There's too much to do." I run a quick systems check– the jet propulsion is offline, the navigation array system is completely fried, and the sail integrity has been reduced to 73%. Nothing terminal yet, but nothing is quite right either.

Outside, the space wreckage has thinned considerably, reduced to small flakes of light. Chunks of ice and rick drift by slowly. The storm has moved on from me, but its effects have not, since there's still no sign of Hale's craft. Returning to the controls, I angle the sail towards the nearest, now-visible star. The delicate foil scrapes, stretches, and begins to catch radiation. Slowly, the ship begins to glide again. "Keep the starboard to the sun," Hale would repeat like gospel, never passing up an opportunity to flex his sailing background. Now I keep the ship tilted that way, half out of habit, half out of hope.

At some point, I give up on checking the clock. Now and then, the bursts of static from comms seem to form Hale's voice, glitching through the void, like he's been hiding in the noise all along. Wishful thinking. The light outside has dulled to a faint gray, with the nearest star's light barely touching the solar sail. The current that had been pushing me along since the storm has gone. Glancing from the window to the instruments, I see that they read nothing– no pull, no drift, no movement. The realization that my craft is suspended in midair, drifting randomly in this infinite void, causes my breath catch in my throat. The sense of panic, barely stifled following Hale's disappearance, begins to set in once again.

Then the stars go out. Not all at once, but in waves, as if someone is quietly unmaking the sky. A black fog seems to set in, the void thickening until it's absolute. My reflection, now visible due to the sudden light level drop, stares back at me from the glass– helmeted, wild-eyed, and half-red by the console's glow.

"Hale," I whisper. The static answers. A soft breath. Almost human. I let it babble, imagining it's a chorus of voices from everyone I love back home. The sail's hanging slack, and I grip the control stick with stone fingers. "Starboard to the sun," I murmur, though there's no sun in sight for me to follow. I twist the control stick until it gives and hear the metal squeal in pain above me. The static rises, whispering, laughing, singing to me. I laugh back at the hilarity of it all, drifting through– what? Space, water, time– it's all the same now. Up, down, starboard, sunward, I don't know, forward, onward, go go go go go.

The darkness outside is alive, pulsing, beautiful. The static hums a tune, and I harmonize with it as the void deepens, creating a symphony. Blood thunders in my ears like a tsunami crashing into the coastline.

I can't tell if I'm moving forward or backward.

I close my eyes.

I let the dark steer.

The light will find me eventually.